

Corrections employees have special day with Harvard Park students

December 10, 2014 By Jason Nevel Staff Writer

Latre Phillips got his wish when he pulled away the wrapping paper Wednesday and saw his favorite wrestler, John Cena.

It didn't take long for the former World Wrestling Entertainment heavyweight champ to battle once Phillips unwrapped his next present, a red Power Ranger.

"(Cena) is my favorite," the first-grader at Harvard Park Elementary School said with a toy in each hand.

Forty-two employees of the Illinois Department of Corrections in Springfield donated their lunch hour Wednesday to spend one-on-one time with a targeted group of students at Harvard Park, 2501 S. 11th St.



Zavion Brooks presents IDOC Chief of Public Safety Brad Curry with an ornament he decorated during their lunch at Harvard Park school Wednesday, Dec. 12, 2014. (Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)

Employees served pizza and drinks before they handed out presents to students they were paired up with. The gifts were based on wish lists that asked students to write down what they wanted and what they needed. In return, Corrections employees received ornaments the students designed.

The gifts included remote-controlled cars, handheld games and basketballs, but also essential items like hats and gloves to help students stay warm for the winter.

Mike Funk, public service administrator for the state agency, said this was the ninth year the Department of Corrections has partnered with Harvard Park. The agency launched the event to help out needy children at a school close to Corrections' central office at 13th and Carpenter streets.

"We try to go out and fill their needs," Funk said.

Kara Clark, special education teacher at Harvard Park, said the one-on-one time Corrections employees spend with the students is what makes the event special. Many of the students don't get that kind of interaction at home, she said.

"A lot of these kids live with single moms and don't have that male role model," Clark said. "So we try to partner the boys with a male employee so they can have that interaction."

Brian Walton, a former computer analyst with Corrections who now works for Illinois Department of Central Management Services, said he has volunteered the past five years.

"You get the benefits of taking part in a program like the Angel Tree — where you give a gift — but you also get that additional one-on-one time," Walton said. "It's a great time every year."

(Seven-page photo gallery starts on the next page)



ABOVE: Jamon Williams, a second-grader, learns to drive a radio-controlled car with Mike Funk Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014 at Harvard Park School. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Fourth-grader Antonio Hernandez received new clothes, including a hat and a sweatshirt, from Felipe Zavala during their lunch Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Xavier Porter proudly displays his new Monsters hat, a pair of gloves and a teddy bear Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014 at Harvard Park School. The items were gifts from Corrections employee Anne Rayhill. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: IDOC Chief of Programs and Support Services Shannis Stock and Nyiesha Watson, her lunch buddy, say goodbye at the end of their lunch hour at Harvard Park School Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: IDOC official Glen Austin shows Corey Ballard how to grip his new football Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014 at Harvard Park School. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Kountess Masters-Stout approves of her new doll, a gift from Michelle Buscher, during lunch at Harvard Park School Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Kountess Masters-Stout thanks her lunch buddy Michelle Buscher with a hug after their lunch at Harvard Park School Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Sanquinton and D'Angelo Standley play with a new radio-controlled car Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014 at Harvard Park School. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Ed Clark takes a picture of Harvard Park second-grader Kountess Masters-Stout with her lunch buddy, Michelle Buscher Wednesday Dec. 10, 2014. Buscher and 41 other Department of Corrections employees spent their lunch hour with a Harvard Park student before sharing gifts with them. It's the ninth year they've been to the school. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register)



ABOVE: Chief Stock gets a hug from first-grader Latre Phillips as she and Chief Curry depart after their lunch hour at Harvard Park School Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014. (Photo: Rich Saal/SJ-R)



ABOVE: Kountess Masters-Stout wears her new hat on her way back to her classroom Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2014 at Harvard Park School. (Photo by Rich Saal/The State Journal-Register).